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Using History to Explain Trump

Paul Rich

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P.O. Box 110450, Abu Dhabi, UAE

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The election of Donald Trump has produced not only great surprise but explanations heavily dependent on the past for providing a guide to one of the more unusual figures to enter the White House. It is, of course, by no means uncommon for political commentators to use history to identify where political figures come from in American politics: whether, for instance, they are “big government liberals” or “Reaganite conservatives.” Trump is a rather different case since he is a New York billionaire rather than professional politician and has presented himself as a figure outside the mainstream political “establishment.”

One of the key questions to emerge from the presidential election has been the attempt to identify who exactly Trump is. Turning to the past seems the obvious thing to do, especially as epithets such as “fascist”, “populist” and “isolationist” have been frequently bandied about, words that emerge from both American and European history. This resort to history reflects, I would suggest, a sense of doubt and disbelief at the heart of much contemporary American political debate,

especially among liberals. The dominant grand narrative of the US has traditionally been anchored in myth rather than history since it has been myths of progress and the fulfilment of the American Dream that have underpinned much of the rhetoric of left and right alike, even in times of crisis such as the Vietnam War. Trump’s campaign slogan of making America “great” implies it is “great” no longer, either internationally or in the self-esteem of American voters: with voters putting their trust in a new strong leader the myth suggests that America can be restored to its former rightful place in the global order.

Trump has thus been remarkably successful in identifying himself with a myth of America’s fall from grace. This is based on the idea of a nostalgic return to an imagined past golden age, a theme familiar from the politics of the Reagan era and the Hollywood vision of small town America. In the 2016 presidential election, this became mobilised into a far more deep-seated challenge to the political status quo, with appeals to ethnic and racial sectarianism and a coarsening of political language that have produced

panic and alarm among many commentators over the future of democratic politics.

The danger here is a turning to history to find some sort of morality tale that will, in some way, alert and warn others of the dangers of current trends, without necessarily providing any clear

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guide to how they might be resolved. Using history in this way carries the danger of labelling and

categorising people into friends and enemies, especially if some of the words carry emotive baggage such as “fascist” or “populist.” This shuts down serious political dialogue and reinforces an already polarised political situation. Moreover, there is the added danger of suggesting to people who do not necessarily have much historical knowledge that events are, in some way, bound to repeat themselves.

Looking at the discussion that has emerged since Trump’s election, I identify four main historical approaches to explain his surprise victory: the fascism approach, the populist approach, the political reactionary approach; and the isolationist approach. Each of these offers, it can be

argued, some insight into Trump as a political figure, though each suffers from the limitations of “instant” history. I will argue that none provide any clear guide to how an alternative politics to “Trumpism” might develop over the next few years, especially as this was such a closely-fought election in which Hillary Clinton won nearly 3 million more popular votes, 48.2% of the total, compared to Trump’s 46.1%, despite failing to win a majority in the electoral college.

The election can be viewed in more than one way: for some, what really matters are the short term strategic issues, in which Clinton took some of her power base for granted and allowed Trump to win in several key states such as Michigan and Pennsylvania; alongside this there are more deep-seated structural and cultural issues which the election has exposed. It is the latter themes that have currently taken hold of discussion on Trump, though the actual experience of office might temper much of this, especially if, as I am inclined to believe, this proves to be quite a dull and uninspiring administration seriously out of its depth in the complex world of international politics.

However, the latter discussion of structural and cultural dimensions of the

election has drawn many to see the US as a deeply polarised society at war with itself. For some, this recalls Weimar Germany in the early 1930s and it is easy to see why the “fascist” label – the first of our approaches - has been so readily applied to Trump and his abrasive campaign. The adjective has always been problematic since to label a person as “fascist” is as pejorative as “racist” or “Nazi.” Using racist or sexist language and even proposing the building of a wall to restrict immigration from Mexico is hardly “fascist” – it accords far more with traditions of American nativism and anti-immigration impulses since fascism is associated with inter-war militarism and uniformed militias beating and killing their opponents like Mussolini’s thuggish *squarest* in the 1920s and 1930s. Fascism was an ersatz ideology cooked up in the 1920s at the behest of Mussolini after seizure of power in 1922 to rationalise an authoritarian corporate state (he later proudly described it as “totalitarian”), a concordat with the Vatican in 1929, strong anti-communism that kept the Communist leader Antonio Gramsci in jail till his death in 1937 and an aggressive foreign policy that led in the 1930s to colonial adventurism in Africa and the Balkans.

There is no evidence for anything comparable to this in Trump’s campaign, though Trump has gone on record as regretting that the US did not annex Iraq in 2003. Trump might possibly try to mobilise his supporters from the Republican Party into some sort of fascist-style party, leading to alliances with long established extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. But does he need to do this or have the will for it? He is now 70 and it is hard to see him desperately wanting to transform American politics in any distinctively “fascist” direction, though he may use the threat of legal action to try to silence some of his more vocal opponents in the media. America is not faced with anything like a major class war or communist threat comparable to the 1930s. Neither has it been defeated in a major war and we are not even in a period like the early 1950s, when the McCarthyite anti-communist witch hunts emerged in the wake of the supposed “loss” of China in 1949. So, overall, I see no serious evidence that

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Trump's president marks any serious "fascist" turn in American politics, certainly in the short-term, even if it is welcomed by racist extremists on the far-right.

At best, therefore, we can talk of a "neo fascist" style emerging with Trump. As with so many things surrounding his campaign, this is largely media-inspired. As we shall see later, Trump is essentially the product rather than the creator of a reactive turn in American politics, marked by a strong nostalgia for things past. The successful television series *Madmen*, for instance, focused attention on the 1960's where there was no real "political correctness": people smoked in offices staffed mostly by white people and where women were almost entirely subordinate to the authority of powerful white men. On a more extreme level, the ill-advised series *The Man in the High Castle* (now in its second series and released via Amazon) projects an alternative historical narrative of an America run by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan after it lost World War Two: here are images of a white non-Jewish America where black people are marginal figures and schools very orderly places with obedient students never taking any drugs. While this might be a dystopian nightmare for the metropolitan liberal

elite, the impact on nativist opinion at the local level is hard to estimate, but, arguably, has fed into the resurgence of a new media Nazism by groups of racist activists only too ready to deny the holocaust (which significantly does not feature in *The Man in the High Castle*).

The second approach of political populism has been offered as a rather more satisfactory alternative to the fascism approach and is particularly associated with the historian Niall Ferguson, currently engaged in a massive biography of Henry Kissinger. Ferguson sees Trump's election as part of a wider populist tradition in American politics stretching back to the nineteenth century, especially during the economic recession between the mid-1870s and 1890s when populists such as William Jennings Bryan emerged into political prominence. This sort of populism, he argues, tends to be demagogic and verbally violent rather than militaristic like European fascism and is mostly against getting involved in overseas conflicts.¹ Here we should be wary of reading too much into Trump from previous history since he is also committed to a major expansion in US defence expenditure, though we can see the unstable ideology of Trump's campaign

having some resemblance to unstable populist ideologies of the past that come and go to meet the particular agitations – such as the “yellow peril” scares over Chinese immigration in California.

But there is a more general concern about Ferguson’s mode of historical reasoning. He has suggested, first, that Trump is part of a general international populist backlash against globalisation (one that includes the British Brexit) and,

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second, searches for historical evidence in American populist history to fit the Trump case. This is an

example of an historian being attached to a theory and then looking for evidence to fit it: if not in California, then perhaps in the South or Mid-West, although it is not too difficult to find examples of anti-immigration and nativist movements in the US since at least the 1850s.

This is not good history and there is the additional question of whether Trump as a billionaire New York insider really fits the populist thesis. This is, I would suggest, more a case of a top-down and managed pseudo-populism rather than one with

roots in indigenous local level populist movements such as those of the nineteenth century. Trump resembles less William Jennings Bryan than the billionaire Ross Perot who also fought a populist-style campaign as an independent in the 1992 presidential election and as a third-party candidate for the Reform Party in 1996. Though Perot was unsuccessful in both cases, winning 18.9% of the vote in 1992 and only 8.4% in 1996, he established a model for a wealthy business outsider to attempt to break into the US political system. Trump’s campaign, I would suggest, was far more influenced by the Perot example than nineteenth century populism which, at best, influenced some of his style and language.

In any case, how far did this supposed populist campaign pay off? Trump’s victory has sometimes been explained in terms an “angry white men” theory, especially among blue collar voters who have felt betrayed by the Democratic Party machine. The 2016 election however does not uniformly confirm this since, despite losing the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes, Trump won by picking up several key strategic states such as Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan with large working class electorates. Here

Trump – using the previous British model of Brexit- appealed directly to the political and cultural fears of white working class voters in the rustbelt who felt betrayed by an apparently indifferent figure of Hillary Clinton, who talked more about the fulfilment of identity and equality of opportunity rather than addressing issues of economic and social empowerment at the local level. The “angry white men” theory may this be as much due to Democratic strategic failings as it does to some nation-wide populist revolt. It has, interestingly, led to a heated debate over the politics of multi-culturalism which the intellectual historian Mark Lilla has castigated as a form of pseudo politics anchored in self-expression rather than serious issues and one, he has argued, that the Democrats need to consider abandoning if they are to make serious inroads into the Republican gains in the working-class heartland.²

Trump is thus a dubious figure in the American populist pantheon. He might appear, at some levels, to be a populist politician employing all the right forms of nativist discourses against immigrants such as Mexicans and Hispanics, but he is also a billionaire New York insider who has successfully presented himself as the anti-

establishment candidate. It is perhaps one of the failings of Hillary Clinton’s rather inept presidential campaign that she did not confront him more strongly on his supposed credentials to speak for outsiders in rustbelt states. Trump’s success was due to his close understanding of his audiences hopes and fears as much to populism per se: his years as a host for the reality TV show *The Apprentice* provided excellent training in this regard. This was as much as anything, therefore, a media-generated “populism” that remains in danger, now that Trump is in office, of finding itself disconnected from its grass roots base of support.

The third approach is a rather gloomy liberal assessment of the American political future as one marked by political reaction, especially if Trump forges close ties with authoritarian regimes like Putin’s Russia. One of the best examples of this outlook is Mark Lilla again, who, in *The Shipwrecked Mind*,³ suggests that we are now entering a period when political reactionaries will be in the ascendant. Lilla points out that “reaction” has been far less well studied by historians compared to revolutionary and progressive intellectuals, although there is a series of important figures such as Eric Voegelin and

Leo Strauss who have helped shape a body of ideas in academe and beyond in the decades since 1945 - Strauss especially on the neoconservatism of the George W. Bush administration). These figures were often dismissed in the era of American prosperity, though they have acquired an increasing relevance in a more pessimistic era marked by a decline of faith in traditional values and a reaction to materialism of neoliberalism. There is considerable value in this sort of intellectual history, though questions need to be asked over how far such reactionary intellectuals can forge, or at least reinforce, a wider intellectual climate that feeds into wider popular politics. Reactionary thought is marked by nostalgia rather than hope, which Michelle Obama now considers to have been abandoned in an America under Trump. But while hopes can lead to disappointment nostalgia, as Lilla points out, is “irrefutable” and so harder to demolish by rational argument.⁴

The nostalgia that underpinned much of Trump’s campaign thus does not need to be supported by too many rational ideas. Trump appears to have no time at all for intellectuals as he appeals to a mass base with speeches that are more stream of consciousness glibberish than serious

political rhetoric. It is difficult, at this point at least, to take Trump seriously even as a major reactionary political leader, though if he does manage to embed himself into the White House, it is possible to imagine reactionary intellectuals emerging to rationalise his policies both domestically and internationally.

Understanding reactionaries historically thus provides useful insights into the likely trajectory of the administration, since reactionary leaders have sometimes been major figures in their own right; one need only need to think of Otto von Bismarck in nineteenth century Germany to recognise that they can be very important in global politics and Henry Kissinger’s early classic book, *A World Restored*, recounted the role of reactionary figures such as Metternich in the forging of the new order in Europe in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Vienna in 1815.

Reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries are, as Arno Mayer has suggested in *The Furies: Violence and*

[...]reactionary political eras are ones in which lies and false facts will be become even more prevalent than those that came before.

Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions quite complex figures who share some of the impassioned features of the revolutionaries they oppose. As a process, counterrevolution, Mayer has argued, is “more ideologically reactive and contrived” than revolution as well as being “less creative and organic.” Counterrevolutions tend to be guided by myths of a past golden age rather than future utopias and develop more through praxis than coherent theory. There are no real Lenins of counterrevolution though counterrevolutions tend to attract political reactionaries as well as figures feeling acute disappointment or betrayed by the trajectory of the previous revolution.⁵

Seen in these terms, we may possibly be on the crest of a wave of political reaction that, left unchallenged, could mature into a more full-blooded counterrevolution. The reactionary thought that Lilla has identified has been around for years: anti-modernist Platonists in Europe and the US, Christian fundamentalists, far right French intellectuals eager to dispense with the humiliation of past colonial wars and Islamist reactionaries teaching in madrassahs and beyond. Reactionaries often emerge after periods of prolonged

political change or periods which are at least seen to have been marked by changes that are viewed as unacceptable in certain political constituencies. The reactionary is a case, Lilla suggests, of a “shipwrecked mind” that – unlike progressive and radicals who feel they are moving with the flow of history – “sees the debris of paradise drifting past his eyes.” Desperately clutching any of this debris to hand, the reactionary is “immune to modern lies” as he views the past in all its imagined splendour: indicating that reactionary political eras are ones in which lies and false facts will become even more prevalent than those that came before⁶

To this extent, it is just possible to see Trump leading a “reactionary” cause of right wing republicanism against the previous “revolution” in “political correctness.” Nevertheless, it is hard to identify what exactly this “revolution” ever really was in the American case - unless we think of it more in terms of a more general cultural revolution that has been occurring over the last few decades that has led to the widening of citizenship rights and the incorporation of women, black Americans and ethnic minorities into the democratic mainstream in the decades since the

1940s. Albert O. Hirschman in *The Rhetoric of Reaction* has suggested – based mainly on a British rather than American trajectory and shaped by the thinking of T.H. Marshall – three identifiable waves of reaction since the French revolution: first against basic citizenship rights stemming from the French Revolution; second against widening political and voting rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and third against widening welfare rights in the years after 1945.⁷ It is

[...] the history of American law enforcement is marked by examples of overly reactionary political figures

possible to argue for a fourth in terms of a reaction

against widening minority and identity rights claimed by ethnic minorities, handicapped and LGBT communities, though, as we have seen, this might well have cost the Democrats the election and one that Trump might seek to reverse, especially through the appointment of “reactionary” judges to the Supreme Court.

But how far can he go down the other three paths? On Hirschman’s first and second waves, he can restrict citizenship rights and deport citizens, such as those from an Islamic background,

deemed to be a threat to US national security. Similarly, he can encourage states to make voter registration harder for minorities, especially African Americans, continuing a process that has been going on for years in states such as Florida and Pennsylvania. It is hard to see an actual overturning of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, though some of his extreme right wing supporters would doubtless like to return to the era of Jim Crow segregation. Similarly, in the case of the third wave of welfare rights, he can overturn Obama Care and seriously erode what remains of the welfare state in the US, though the effect of this will be to create an increasingly desperate underclass and a likely increase in the already huge prison population.

To embark on such a course risks further severe political polarisation in domestic US politics and the threat of violent disturbances; at worst, ghetto revolts conjuring up memories of the 1960s. Such a pattern would, possibly, spill over into full blown political counterrevolution given the long tradition of harsh American law enforcement. Indeed, the history of American law enforcement is marked by examples of overly reactionary political figures,

especially J. Edgar Hoover as head of the FBI. From the middle 1950s onwards, Hoover was left alone to promote a nationwide FBI COINTELPRO or Counter-Intelligence Program, used with great effect against any opposition groups such as the Black Panthers he deemed radical threats to US domestic security. He appears never to have gained the full and unambiguous support of any US president in this, though the destruction of his papers makes a full assessment difficult. With Trump in power, however, we can envisage an increasingly intensive strategy of domestic suppression of any “radical” opposition by the police and FBI. Indeed, at its most intensive, it suggests a program of domestic counter-insurgency, fulfilling the bleak prediction of George Soros that the US is fated to enter a period of class war, riots and a police state.⁸ In a political climate where “reactionary” ideas prevail it is hard to imagine any such urban unrest leading to a Johnson-style “war on poverty”, as in the 1960s: the more likely response will be a highly repressive one from a police force already highly militarised as well, possibly, from a military schooled in modern counter-insurgency techniques learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This is, of course, one of the more pessimistic predictions. In a deeply divided and troubled country, the Trump administration needs to maintain political momentum among its core block of voters, including an increasingly menacing tone set by its key spokesmen. Unpredictability becomes a major political asset as opponents effectively wait for the next bizarre statement whether it be on creationism, the climate, gays, the poor or welfare spending. This ensures that the administration can maintain the initiative over its opponents though, as always, there is the risk of growing public boredom, indifference or the risk of going too far: McCarthy’s eventual downfall, after all, occurred when he started to threaten the military.

The strategy needs to deliver on at least some of its promises: If it does not, it will come under growing attack not only by disaffected Republicans but by a reconstructed Democratic Party which might itself be able to develop its own distinctive style of populism. Political reaction, in the end, sits rather poorly with grass roots populism: it conjures up a series of measures to disempower those at the local level and to provide greater economic and political power to

established interests. It is not even nationalistic since it seeks out alliances with foreign reactionary powers such as Putin's Russia. The image therefore of making America "great again" will, to some degree, sit rather poorly with an administration closely tied to a Russian mafia capitalism, unless such ties lead, for instance, to extensive arms sales and major investment projects to revitalise some of Russia's crumbling cities.

Likewise, on foreign policy, it is hard for a Trump administration to forge a distinctively "reactionary" profile. The one real counterrevolutionary cause it can easily take up is transforming the economy and society of post-Castro Cuba – this will clearly delight the strongly pro-Trump Cuban exile community in Miami but will do little to win votes more widely across the US unless it leads to extensive new contracts for US businesses and a major growth in gambling and tourism as some features of the Batista era of the 1950s begin to be recreated. Close ties with Russia also provide the basis for some sort of temporary peace settlement in Syria, while a close alliance with Israel will probably lead to a massive expansion in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Here, at least, a creative Trump administration

has a chance to deliver some sort of peace settlement based on a one state solution given how remote any two-state solution now is of working. Like Harold Macmillan blowing the winds of change in British colonial policy and de Gaulle withdrawing France from Algeria, Trump can use its position as a right-wing administration to enforce a settlement that a Democratic administration will find difficult, though to do so means taking the initiative early before serious political opposition can entrench itself.

It is evident from this assessment that the fourth historical approach of "neo-isolationism" is one of the least convincing of the historical explanations for Trump's election victory. Isolationism like populism is a word with a deep resonance in American history, though it describes both a set of policies as well as a state of mind. I talk in any case of "neo-isolationism" since the US was never completely isolationist even in the inter-war years, given its economic intervention into Weimar

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Germany with the Dawes and Young Plans for economic recovery and its continued military interventions into Central America and its “open door” policy towards China. Likewise, it is also hard to see the Trump administration retreating into complete isolation, despite the appeal to many voters of building a wall along the border with Mexico.

Starting with Syria, it is possible to see the US under Trump securing at least an interim peace settlement that maintains the Assad regime in power for the next few years, while consolidating the part of Syria he controls into a Russian client state. A new balance of power politics will be established in the Middle East with the US playing a far less prominent role than it has traditionally been used to, and one sustained by a regional alliance system and the widespread use of drones to assassinate terrorist enemies with little compunction, if any, for collateral damage. This will continue the pattern of military withdrawal begun under Obama in 2011 leaving the US to exert a more indirect influence via other actors in the region.

At the same time, Trump is likely to continue the rebalancing of American

grand strategy begun under Obama away from the Middle East towards the Pacific and especially North West and South East Asia. Here the inevitable dangers are some sort of escalating crisis involving either China or North Korea, especially the latter and it is here that foreign policy analysts should be most concerned. It is evident that the elderly Henry Kissinger was deeply shocked, following a meeting with Trump in November 2016, at just how ignorant Trump is of foreign relations. It is hard to see any early emergence of a “Trump doctrine”, though it is possible that advisors will be able to impress on the him that agreements made in business do not exactly replicate those made in foreign policy where the party you are negotiating with does not simply disappear or go away following one successful deal. The protracted and delicate nature of diplomacy is not likely to be Trump’s forte and it is only to be hoped that this will be an administration that will be able to attune itself to the realities of foreign policy – though what sort of values it can bring to this policy making will doubtless be one of the more intriguing questions for analysts to probe in the years ahead.

NOTES

¹ Niall Ferguson, "Is the US having a populist moment?" *The Boston Globe* February 29 2016.

² Mark Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism," *New York Times* November 18 2016.

³ Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind*. New York: New York Review of Books 2016.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵ Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013, 50.

⁶ Lilla, *op. cit.*, xiii.

⁷ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

⁸ Rosa Prince, "George Soros predicts riots, police state and class war for America," tppahanshilhorst.com 12 November 2016.